

Islam in the Indian Subcontinent by Annmarie Schimmel

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Afghans of his native place by his preaching and was therefore imprisoned in Gwalior for three years, his movement was only a passing phase in Indian history. Much more important was the man who tried to revive Muslim orthodoxy in the Subcontinent and who has lately been praised by some as a symbol of a truly Muslim attitude in a world filled with unbelief; who, 'by setting a noble example of his forceful personality... saved Islam from disintegration',⁴⁰ and blamed by others as the preacher who administered the poison of communalism to the Indian Muslims.⁴¹ That man was Ahmad Sirhindi.

Born in 1564 in Sirhind to 'Abdulahad, a mystic of the Sabiriyya line of 'Abdulquddus Gangohi, Ahmad studied in Sialkot, then an important centre of philosophy and theology, and became quite friendly with Faizi and Abu'l-Fazl for a short while. One of his first treatises was written in refutation of Shia views, for as J. M. S. Baljon says about the representatives of Sunni orthodoxy: 'Any self-respecting Muslim scholar produced, usually in his youth, a polemic against Shiism'.⁴² And indeed, for Ahmad Sirhindi 'the worst of innovators are those who bear malice against the companions of the Prophet. For love, even exaggerated love, of the Prophet's family was part and parcel of everyone's faith; only the *tabarrā*, the aversion to and even cursing of the first three caliphs, seemed abominable to the Sunni Muslims when it came to Shia practices. In 1599 Ahmad was accepted into the Naqshbandi order by Khwaja Baqi billah (1563-1603).

The Naqshbandiyya traces its *silsila* back to Yusuf Hamadhani, a leading master of the 'sober' tradition in the 12th century, and was finally organized by Baha'uddin Naqshband (d. 1389). Under his successors, particularly Khwaja Ahrar (d. 1490) it grew into an eminently political power in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Emphasizing silent *dhikr* in contrast to the more emotional orders that could attract large crowds of followers and friends by means of common loud *dhikr*, religious music and whirling dance, the Naqshbandis stress the purification of the soul and the strict adherence to the practices of the Prophet. Their way is based on eight principles:

hāsh dar dam awareness in breathing (for no breath should be lost without remembering God)⁴³

⁴⁰ M. Ishaq, *India's Contribution to the Study of hadith*, p. 142.

⁴¹ Thus S. A. A. Rizvi, whose *Muslim Revivalist Movements* violently attacks Sirhindi's views.

⁴² J. M. S. Baljon, 'Characteristics of Indian Islam', *Studies in Islam*, Amsterdam 1974, p. 56.

⁴³ Breath control was common with the Sufis, particularly in India. A typical example is the remark of the Suhrawardi saint Makhdum Nuh of Haia (d. 1590) concerning Sura 81/8: 'When the girls that have been buried alive shall be asked.' He explains: 'A person who loses his breath

nazar bar qadam watching one's steps so that one is not distracted when walking in the crowd
safar dar watan interior mystical journey
khalwat dar anjuman solitude in the crowd
yād kard constant occupation with *dhikr*
bāz gasht restraining one's thought
nigāh dāsh to watch that one's thoughts are always with God
yād dāsh concentration and constant awareness of God's omnipresence.

This sober attitude enabled its followers to counteract movements which seemed to blur the distinction between Islam and other religions and attracted people even without formal conversion.

Baqi billah was a quiet man who led a secluded life; he did, however, correspond with scholars like 'Abdulhaqq Muhaddith and politicians like Akbar's trusted friend Farid Bukhari. His disciple Ahmad tried much more energetically to follow the Naqshbandi practice of ameliorating the world, and although he composed quite a few books and treatises his main fame rests upon his 534 Persian letters, which were described by Jahangir as 'a bunch of absurdities'. In one of these letters Sirhindi states that he had reached the subtleties

of spiritual experiences which Shaikh Muhyiddin ibn 'Arabi made clear as it behoves, and this poor person (i.e. the author) was honoured by the manifestation of the Essence which the author of the *Fuṣṣ* has explained and which he knows as the end of the ascension beyond which there is, as he says, only pure not-Being (*al-'adam al-mahd*)...

Such claims, i.e., to have surpassed Ibn 'Arabi's station by reaching the last Divine manifestation or to have attained a rank higher than that of the caliphs, nay, the rank of *maḥbūbiyat*, 'being beloved', made Ahmad suspect in the eyes of many of his colleagues. Jahangir summoned him to Agra in 1619 and had him imprisoned in the fort of Gwalior, 'so that his disturbed disposition and confused mind would calm down a little...'.⁴⁴ In Gwalior Ahmad Sirhindi lived through the spiritual experience of God's Tremendous Power (*jalah*). After a year he was released and given a royal gift, but kept under surveillance. He died in 1624. Iqbal says about his tomb in Sirhind which is still a place of pilgrimage:

The dust, which is a rising point of lights—
 the stars are ashamed of the particles of that dust,
 The dust by which is covered one who knew the mysteries...

without using it in the *dhikr* of God Almighty is as if he buries the innocent breath-shaped ones by his tyranny alive in the earth. From such careless persons will be asked on the Day of Resurrection why they have lost their breath.'

⁴⁴ *Selected Letters*, ed. Fazlur Rahman, Karachi 1968, p. 247. Other important information in Badruddin Sirhindi, *Hazarat al-quds*, Lahore 1974.

⁴⁵ Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i jahangiri*, transl. A. Rogers, and H. Beveridge, repr.; see S. A. A. Rizvi, *Muslim Revivalist Movements* 287 f.

⁴⁶ Muhammad Iqbal, *Bal-i Jibril*, Lahore 1936, p. 211.

Ahmad Sirhindi had been called *imām-i rabbānī* and *mujaddid-i ulf-i thānī*, because he seemed to have arrived in India as the renovator who was to be expected at the beginning of the second millenium after Muhammad. The theories of *tajdīd*, renovation, are laid down in his letters quite clearly but sometimes assume amazing forms.⁴¹ Thus, Sirhindi claimed that Muhammad possessed during his lifetime two individuations, the bodily-human and the spiritual-angelic, symbolized in the two *m* of his name. By the end of one millenium the bodily manifestation had completely disappeared and the first *m* was replaced by an *alif*, in Islamic letter mysticism the symbol of *ulūhiyyat*, Divinity. Thus *Muhammad* became *Ahmad*. The 'perfections of Prophethood', which have been gradually disappearing since Muhammad's time, will reappear in persons who deserve such a blessing because they are the Prophet's heirs and followers. The concept of the 'Prophetic perfections' remained a central point in the teachings of all his followers. The *mujaddid* is called upon to fulfill some of the Prophet's tasks with regard to his community; a 'common believer'—whatever that means—, a man from the *umma*, is trusted with this task. Ahmad Sirhindi built up an intricate theory of the 'common believer' but revealed the final mysteries only to his closest friends. One can, however, be quite sure that his word *Muhammad Ahmad shud*, 'Muhammad has become Ahmad' points to his own name, Ahmad. He also regarded himself as the *qayyūm* upon the world rests, a rank that is meant by the *amāna* (Sura 33/72), the trust which heaven and earth did not accept. As *qayyūm*, he is superior to the *qutb*, the highest member of the generally accepted mystical hierarchy:

All the angels, spirits and human beings and every other object look toward him for assistance. He is the intermediary between man and the Almighty of all spiritual and mundane benefits.⁴²

The claim to possess this supreme rank, which would be inherited by three of his descendants, sounds absurd to a modern reader, and as towards the end of the 17th century 'Abdullah Khweshgi from Qasur indeed accused the *mujaddid* of having arrogated Prophetic qualities thus lately Maulana Maududi was very critical of Ahmad Sirhindi's claim to be the *mujaddid*.⁴³

Ahmad Sirhindi's teachings develop logically out of his aversion to Akbar's policy of reconciliation, which is, in his eyes, anti-Islamic. This explains the frequent discussions about the 'perfections of prophethood' and the 'perfections of sainthood', and the emphasis on *qurb al-farā'id*, proximity to God as obtained through legally prescribed works (which is the way of the prophets)

⁴¹ Analyzed best in Y. Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi*, Montreal/London 1971.

⁴² *Makrūbat* II Nr. 74, quoted by Rizvi, *Revivalist Movements* p. 266 ff.

⁴³ Abu'l-Ala Maududi, *Tajdīd u ihyā-yi dīn*, Rampur 1945, p. 161 f. Cf. also Rizvi, l.c., p. 270.

against *qurb an-nawāfil*, proximity reached through supererogatory works (the way of the saints). That again is connected with the problem of 'intoxication', the station of the saints, and 'second sobriety', the station of the prophets. These distinctions then form the basis of Ahmad's theory of the superiority of *waḥdat ash-shuhūd* over Ibn 'Arabi's *waḥdat al-wujūd*: the mystic, intoxicated, experiences unitive ecstasy and sees nothing but God; in spiritual intoxication which does not change after his 'return', he feels that 'Everything is He', *hama ūst*, if he is a poet, or tries to build up and elaborate the doctrine of Unity of Being if he is a philosopher. As for the wayfarer who follows the Prophetic example, he will reach the same station but will finally return, purified and transformed, into the world (*sair ilā'l-ashyā*); then he knows that the unitive experience is subjective, not objective: not 'Everything is He' but rather 'Everything is from Him' (*hama az ūst*)—that is his credo.

Thus the psychological types of what European history of religion calls 'mystical and prophetic piety' are clearly carved out by Sirhindi, who however relies on earlier mystical theories. Important is the emphasis on the return to the world—although the world is only half-real because only that aspect that is turned toward God has some reality. It is the duty of the mystic of the sober or 'prophetic' type to work in the world in order to ameliorate it according to the Divine order. He experiences, as one of Sirhindi's followers says in a beautiful image, that his heart, at the end of the spiritual road, is surrounded by the light of the circular letter *h*, the last and essential letter of the name of God, *Allah*, which points to the Divine Ipseity, *hawīya*; and embraced by this light he fulfills his duties.⁴⁴

On a basically simple foundation the Naqshbandiyya could develop their role in the political and social life of India. As the order had been politically influential in Central Asia under 'Ubaidullah Ahrar (whom Babur admired greatly), Ahmad Sirhindi adopted the ideal of the earlier masters that 'to serve the world it is necessary to exercise political power, and to bring the rulers under control' (J. Fletcher). For this reason many of Ahmad's letters are directed to the nobles of the Moghul court, among them Khankhanan 'Abdurrahim, whom he tried to win over for the revival of orthodoxy. He felt that the infidels should be humiliated, the real purpose of levying the *jizya* on them, and he even defended cow sacrifice, which had been prohibited by Akbar, as 'the noblest Islamic practice'.⁴⁵ He also fought for the suppression of all innovations, against ignorant *pīrs* and against the superstitions of women, such as fasting in the name of saints or sacrificing something at a saint's tomb

⁴⁴ Nasir Muhammad 'Andalib, *Nāla-i 'Andalīb*, Bhopal 1308/1890-1, I 270.

⁴⁵ Rizvi, *Revivalist Movements* p. 249 ff.

(which, according to him, amounted to *shirk*, the greatest possible sin). It is disputed to what extent Aurangzeb was influenced by the second *qayyūm*, Sirhindi's son Muhammad Ma'sum; the fourth and last *qayyūm*, Muhammad Zubair, died shortly after Nadir Shah's sack of Delhi in 1740. The importance of the *qayyūms* has been described with endless miraculous details in the unpublished hagiographical work *Raudat al-qayyūmiyya* by Abu'l Faiz Kamaluddin Ihsan, which was completed after the last *qayyūm*'s death.³²

All his aversion to traditional Sufism notwithstanding, Ahmad Sirhindi, too, gratefully acknowledged Ibn 'Arabi's role as the great systematizer of mystical knowledge to whom all later mystics are indebted for their tools, i.e. their technical terminology; and although he regarded *waḥdat al-wujūd* as only a preliminary step on the way to the Absolute Truth, he still used Ibn 'Arabi's vocabulary without hesitation, as did almost all the later Sufis.

Ahmad Sirhindi's contemporaries' views on his pretensions were divided. One great believer in his claims was 'Abdulhakim Sialkoti (d. 1656) whose commentaries on the standard works of dogmatics and grammar were used all over India, who introduced the mystical philosophy of Molla Sadra Shirazi in the Subcontinent, and whose fame reached the Ottoman Empire already during his lifetime. It was this scholar who openly called Ahmad by the honorific title of *mujaddid*. On the other hand, the great master of *ḥadīth* in Delhi, 'Abdulhaqq Dihlawi (d. 1642), made some very negative remarks about him: he castigated Sirhindi for 'lack of humility' and held that his arrogant attitude was unprecedented; he compared him to the Mahdi of Jaunpur who also claimed to have acquired all the perfections of the Prophet by faithfully following him. He even felt that 'a Muslim bristles with horror at statements of the kind that Sirhindi made'.³³

'Abdulhaqq himself came from a mystically-minded family. His paternal uncle belonged to the Shattari order and had composed some works in Hindi. The young scholar, 'a compendium of perfect qualities and a source of excellence', studied in Mecca for several years. His master in *ḥadīth*, 'Abdulwahhab Burhanpuri, was the disciple and *famulus* of one of the outstanding Indian immigrants to the holy city, 'Ali al-Muttaqi of Burhanpur, a place which at that time, besides being an important strategic point, housed an remarkable settlement not only of Sindhi mystics but also of Sindhi weavers who contributed to its spiritual and economic bloom respectively. 'Ali al-Muttaqi had left Burhanpur for Multan, then acted as *qāḍī* in Ahmadabad and finally reached Mecca in 1534 to die there in 1568 as a nonagenarian. His

³² A Ms. of the *Raudat al-qayyūmiyya* is preserved in the Asiatic Society of Bengal; it has never been edited, but Urdu versions exist, see S. M. Ikram, *Rūd-i kaushar*, Lahore, 4th edition, 1969.

³³ Friedmann, *Sirhindi*, p. 89.

well-arranged handbook of *ḥadīth*, the *Kanz al-'ummāl*, is most useful for everyone interested in the applicability of Prophetic traditions. After a brief digression 'Ali al-Muttaqi turned into a fiery enemy of the Mahdawis as can be seen from his work *Talkhīs al-bayān fī 'alāmāt mahdī akhīr az-zamān*, which, like the *Kanz al-'ummāl*, is based on Suyuti's work. 'Abdulhaqq Dihlawi dedicated his biographical work *Zād al-muttaqīn* to the memory of his two teachers in Mecca and, after his return to Delhi, produced numerous Arabic and Persian works in *ḥadīth* studies, historiography and hagiography, of which the *Akhbār al-akhyār*, a handbook of Chishtī saints (he came from the Chishtī-Sabirī *silsila*) deserves mention. He had a friendly correspondence with Khwaja Baqī billah, the first major Naqshbandī in India, and built up a remarkable library predominantly with works on tradition. He employed scribes to copy rare works in this field and others; and the interest in *ḥadīth* remained alive in his family through several generations. But Ahmad Sirhindi's ecstatic utterances in his opinion transgressed the borders of orthodox Islam.³⁴

The main activities of 'Abdulhaqq Muhaddith as well as of 'Abdulhakim Sialkoti and Molla Mahmud Faruqi Jaunpuri (d. 1653) belong to the period of Shahjahan, an age 'of white marble inlaid with jewels, if not actually an age of gold'.³⁵ Jahangir had died in 1627; Nur Jahan, who erected his elegant mausoleum in Lahore-Shahdara, died in 1645 and is buried in a lonely tomb, separated now from her husband's mausoleum by the busy railway line. Her brother, Asaf Khan, was instrumental in Prince Khurram's accession as Shahjahan. This prince, born in 1592, had rebelled against his father; he was certainly not unaware of the mysterious circumstances of the death of his eldest brother, Khusrau, in 1622. Asaf Khan finally blinded Khurram's other brother, Shahriyar, and thus secured the throne for him, the husband of his daughter Mumtaz Mahal. The princess, one year younger than her husband, died at the birth of her fourteenth child in Burhanpur (1631), and the emperor erected in her memory the Taj Mahal, that most famous monument of Indo-Muslim art.

In the political field Shahjahan was partly successful; from Burhanpur, a glacis for the Deccani war, he annexed Daulatabad and completely incorporated Ahmadnagar into the Moghul Empire; in Bengal he seized Hooghly from the Portuguese. In home politics 'the empire had begun to assume the glacial hardness of the stones he so admired',³⁶ for he followed a

³⁴ S. A. A. Rizvi says that the Muhaddith had positive and tangible influences, while the Mujaddid's influence was negative and damaging, *Revivalist Movements*, p. 280.

³⁵ S. C. Welch, *The Art of Mughal India*, New York 1963, p. 101.

³⁶ S. C. Welch, *id.*

more orthodox policy, disallowed the erection of new temples, began even to demolish some temples in 1633, and reinstalled the pilgrimage tax for Hindus: conversions to Hinduism which had occurred, though rarely, were again prohibited. Yet a work like the *Mir'at al-makhlūqat*, a Persian version of a Sanskrit treatise on Hindu cosmology, was composed in his reign (1631) by 'Abdurrahman Chishti from the Sabiriyya centre in Rudauli.¹⁷ 'Abdulhakim Sialkoti dedicated to the Emperor the *Risāla al-khaqāniyya*, which deals with the qualities of God, and Molla Mahmud Jaunpuri, the philosopher, was invited to Agra. This scholar's main work, *Al-hikma al-baligha*, to which he chose to write his own commentary, *Ash-shams al-bāzigha*, became the standard work on philosophy, prescribed in the final course in the major religious institutions in India, such as the Firangi Mahal, whose founder, like many others, commented upon it. Molla Mahmud was not inclined towards *wahdat al-wujūd* and refuted the relevant theories of Muhibbullah Allahabadi, while his compatriot, 'Abdurrahshid Jaunpuri, was—contrary to him—'so absorbed in the study of Ibn 'Arabi's work that he declined an invitation of Shahjahan'.¹⁸

The emperor continued the traditional tripartition of the religious administration, the chief *qāḍī* being in charge of problems of the *shari'a*, the *ṣadr as-ṣudūr* of the endowments, and the *muhtasib* acting as censor of public morals. Muslim festivals were lavishly endowed—30,000 rupees were spent in Ramadan, and 10,000 rupees each in the months of Muharram, Rajab, Sha'ban and Rabi' al-awwal. On the other hand Shahjahan surrounded himself with a splendid array of poets, painters and artists and was perhaps the greatest connoisseur of luxury goods in his time; he also indulged incessantly in building. In 1638, when the Taj Mahal was still under construction, he laid the foundation-stone of Delhi Fort, the *Lal Qila*, 'Red Fort'. The Jami Masjid opposite the fort was built between 1648 and 1650 so that the new 'classicistic' Delhi became known as Shahjahanabad. The *Windsor Shah-jahānnāma* with its superb miniatures reflects the glory of his reign, for he enjoyed being portrayed in full imperial majesty in the midst of his nobles. His last years, however, were overshadowed by the conflicts between his sons, Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb, in whom the tendencies inherent in Indian Islam seemed to be personified: Dara representing the search for a common basis, a 'mystical' identity between Islam and Hinduism—built upon the first half of the profession of faith, e.g., 'There is no deity save God', to which mystically-minded Hindus could as well subscribe, while Aurangzeb, possibly under

Naqshbandi influence, laid emphasis on the singularity of Islam as expressed in the second half of the profession of faith: 'Muhammad is the Messenger of God', by which Islam is singled out as a particular religion whose limits are determined by the law brought by the Prophet.

When Ahmad Sirhindi died in 1624, Jahangir's eldest grandson was nine years old. Dara Shikoh was born on March 19, 1615, ten years after the death of his great-grandfather Akbar, whose ideals he tried to revive. Like Jahangir, Dara was born in Ajmer, where his father Khurram had prayed for a son. That explains perhaps the father's excessive fondness for his eldest son, a fondness that disturbed Aurangzeb deeply. Shahjahan ascended the throne in 1627, but the heir apparent showed more interest in reading, calligraphy and mysticism than in practical politics while 'Alamgir Aurangzeb, junior to him by four years, excelled already as a mere boy in many virtues: Kalim, the poet laureate, dramatically describes the fifteen years' old prince's successful fight with a wild elephant, a scene that forms also the subject of some miniatures. At the age of 18 Aurangzeb was appointed governor of the Deccan. An early visit with his father at the sanctuary of Mian Mir in Lahore, where the ailing boy was miraculously cured, was probably decisive for Dara's development; contrary to the Moghul allegiance to the Chishtiyya, he later became affiliated to the Qadiriyya order.

The first Qadiri Sufis found their way to the Subcontinent in the early 15th century,¹⁹ but the Qadiriyya was formally introduced in the Subcontinent by a descendant of the founder, Shaikh Bandagi Muhammad Ghauth (d. 1517), who settled in 1482 in Uch; the house of the *sajjadanishin* is still the centre of the order in Pakistan, where the records of the *silsila* are kept. From Uch the order spread through the southern Punjab where Shaikh Da'ud, inspired by visions during his stay at Farid Ganj-i Shakar's shrine, founded the first centre between Multan and Pakpattan, as his faithful admirer, Bada'uni, tells.²⁰ Then the Qadiriyya reached Sind, and there, in Sehwan, Mir Muhammad ibn Qadi Sa'idino, called Mian Mir, was born in 1550, shortly before his maternal grandfather Qadi Qadan, the first noted Sindhi mystical poet, died. Mian Mir settled in Lahore, leading a celibate life. Miniatures show him with his shawl tied around his knees and back so as to form a kind of 'chair', the arthritic fingers keeping a rosary. The saint died in 1635 and is buried in a lovely

¹⁷ S. A. A. Rizvi, *Revivalist Movements*, p. 353 ff.

¹⁸ Brockelmann, *GAL* II p. 612.

¹⁹ A small *ziyarat* in Kallakhar in the Salt Range, Pakistan, is defined, by a modern inscription, as the place where two grandsons of Abdulqadir Gilani were slain by the Hindus in 566/1170-1. That would be the first date of Qadiri presence in the Subcontinent. In Bijapur, first traces are found in 1422.

²⁰ Bada'uni, *Muntakhab*, III, transl. 57, text 53.